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Pentagon Cites Safety Concern in Campaign for Nerve Gas Funds

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 28 — The Pentagon said today that leaks had been detected in "hundreds" of poison gas weapons stored at military depots in eight states and that, although the leaks had caused no casualties, they constituted a "safety concern."

Dr. Thomas J. Welch, the assistant for chemical warfare to the Secretary of Defense, also said that it was "not tolerable" that the Soviet Union could deploy chemical weapons over a battlefield hundreds of miles deep while the United States would be confined to artillery that can lob nerve gas shells only a few miles into an enemy's lines.

These statements and the publication of a new edition of a Pentagon booklet on the "Soviet Chemical Weapons Threat" were meant to encourage Congress to restore \$163.5 million in funds to produce a new generation of nerve gas weapons. The House Appropriations Committee deleted the money from the 1986 appropriation bill last week.

Mr. Welch, who is a physicist, said at a news conference that the Pentagon hoped there would be support to restore the funds on the House floor, where the bill is expected to come up this week.

Two Chemicals Are Combined

The new weapons are designed so that two relatively inert and harmless chemicals will only be mixed into lethal nerve gas shortly before hitting a target. For several years the Administration has asked Congress for funds to build these "binary" nerve gases and the weapons to deliver them in battle, but has been rebuffed.

Mr. Welch also said that intelligence experts believed it was a "certainty" that the Soviet Union had been seeking to develop new toxic gases that could penetrate American gas masks and protective garments. "There is some question about their success in being able to field these things," he added.

Intelligence experts also believe, he said, that poison gas depots in the Soviet Union had increased 26 percent in 10 years. The new Pentagon booklet said 32 such depots were in Warsaw Pact countries.

American chemical warfare depots are in Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky,

Indiana, Colorado, Utah, Oregon and Maryland, the Pentagon said. In raising the issue of leaking gas weapons in these arsenals, Mr. Welch was engaged in intricate parliamentary tactics: the Pentagon wants to suggest that there is a real and growing danger in storing old chemical weapons, but it also wishes to convey the belief that it can safely manage the problem.

'Substantial Increase' Alleged

Mr. Welch said he believed the Appropriations Committee had been told that the number of leaking weapons was only about 20 and that the Pentagon did not regard it a problem.

"The figure is much higher; it's in the hundreds," he said. He added that the number had "increased substantially" since earlier this year, but did not give precise figures.

In response to questions, he said the leaking weapons were stored in igloo-like structures and that when leaks were detected the weapons were sealed in special containers and destroyed. "We're confident that we can handle it that we can detect with very sensitive instruments these munitions as they begin to break down," he said.

Asked why he had raised the issue, Mr. Welch said one reason was the increase in leaks. But he added that the Pentagon goal was Congressional approval to build new weapons and de-

stroy old stockpiles, which he said was the only responsible course of action.

The Pentagon has never asked Congress for funds merely to destroy old and useless weapons. It has preferred to link funds for production of new weapons to funds for disposal. Mr. Welch contended that "nearly 90 percent" of the weapons now in storage had no further military utility because they were warheads for rockets or shells no longer in use.

Battlefield Coverage Cited

The argument that Mr. Welch put most emphasis on was that a credible United States deterrent to chemical warfare did not exist because of the greater battlefield coverage available to Soviet forces.

The new publication contended that Soviet fighter bombers could carry chemical weapons to almost all of Western Europe and that ground-to-ground missiles could attack 180 miles behind allied lines.

This, Mr. Welch said, would mean that very large numbers of American troops and airmen would have to operate while wearing protective garments and masks. In hot weather such gear can reduce efficiency by up to 50 percent, according to the Pentagon.

Such handicaps would not be imposed on Soviet forces outside of artillery range, Mr. Welch said.